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Public Warned of Dangers of Unauthorized Entry Onto Active, Abandoned Mines Following Two Accidental Deaths in Virginia

Richmond, VA- Two accidental deaths in less than three weeks on Virginia mine sites at opposite ends of the State have prompted mine safety officials to issue another warning to the general public concerning the dangers of active and abandoned mine sites. A drowning in a quarry pit and a fatal fall from an abandoned coal mine highwall were the first deaths in Virginia this year involving individuals who ventured onto active or abandoned mine sites. Nationwide, 25 people have lost their lives this year following unauthorized entry onto mine property, compared to 17 in 1999.

A seventeen-year-old juvenile drowned on October 28, 2000, after diving from a 50-foot highwall into a water-filled pit at a Prince William County stone quarry, which is currently undergoing reclamation. On November 16, 2000, a Buchanan County resident was killed while trying to remove house coal from an exposed coal seam, when he fell approximately 15-20 feet from an abandoned surface mine highwall and was struck by falling rock.

“Unauthorized visits to active or abandoned mine sites by persons not trained to be aware of the many dangers of these sites is an invitation to tragedy,” said Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy (DMME) Abandoned Mine Land Program Manager Roger Williams. “People who have not worked in or around mines simply do not appreciate the potentially lethal risks they are taking by attempting to swim in a quarry pit, climb on highwalls or explore mine openings. To the uninitiated, venturing onto such areas is like playing with a loaded weapon; they should be avoided at all costs,” Williams said.

Drowning is the leading cause of accidental death resulting from unauthorized entry onto active and abandoned mine sites nationwide. This year, 18 of the 25 non-mining related fatalities occurred in water-filled quarries or mine pits. “In addition to hazards posed by rock outcroppings and abandoned equipment hidden beneath the water’s surface, the water in these quarries and pits can be cold enough to endanger the swimmer,” notes DMME Division of Mineral Mining Director Conrad Spangler. “There is no good reason to enter an active or abandoned mine site without proper authorization or supervision; there are many reasons why the public should never enter these areas,” Spangler said.

The following list of hazards at active and abandoned mine sites, along with additional resource information developed by the national Mine Hazard Awareness Campaign “*Stay Out – Stay Alive*,” of which Virginia is a partner, may be found at www.msha.gov and www.osmre.gov/keepout.htm.

- **Vertical shafts** can be hundreds of feet deep. At the surface, shafts can be completely unprotected, hidden by vegetation, or covered by rotting boards.
- **Horizontal openings** may seem sturdy, but rotting timbers and unstable rock formations make cave-ins a real danger. Darkness and debris add to the hazards.
- Lethal concentrations of **deadly gases** (methane, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and hydrogen sulfide) can accumulate in underground passages.
- Unused or misfired **explosives** can become unstable and deadly—vibrations from a touch or footfall can trigger an explosion.
- Excavated vertical cliffs—**highwalls**—in open pit mines and quarries can be unstable and prone to collapse.
- Hills of loose material in **stock or refuse piles** can easily collapse to bury an unsuspecting biker or climber.
- **Water-filled quarries and pits** can hide rock ledges, old machinery, and other hazards. Because of the depth, the water can be dangerously cold; steep, slippery walls make exiting these swimming holes very difficult.

DMME encourages Virginia residents to report instances or evidence of public visitation at abandoned mines by e-mailing DmmeInfo@dmme.virginia.gov or calling (276) 523-8206 or (804) 951-6316.

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